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# Women's Concerns Report



## How the Bible is vital for feminist women of faith: Responses through the years

The compilation of this issue has taken some twists and turns along the way. I was asked to compile an issue on "how the Bible is vital for contemporary feminist women of faith," presumably because I'm a feminist, and I've spent the past 15 years of my life being paid to read the Bible. Due to a variety of circumstances, the details of which I assure you are quite boring, the issue has evolved into something a little more retrospective and perhaps introspective. What we are presenting here is a look back at where we have been on matters of the Bible, as well as a look at where we are now with the two pieces by Talinda Berry and Rachel Miller Jacobs—two very contemporary interpreters of the biblical text.

The coming of a new year is always a good time to reflect on who we are and how we have come to be who we are. It is also a good time to look back because the MCC U.S. Women's Concerns Desk—which has managed this publication, as well as other projects on the behalf of Mennonite and Brethren in Christ women—is nearing its thirtieth-year anniversary. To mark this occasion I, as one reader but no doubt representing others, want to thank the people who have produced *Women's Concerns Report* over the years. Consistently and superbly, *Report* has provided an opportunity for women to say, honestly and forthrightly, things for which there was no other forum. Consistently and superbly, *Report* has provided space for

many different women's voices: public women, private women, women from all over Canada and the U.S., and international women. Consistently and superbly, *Report* has modeled a collaborative style of production, persisting in selecting different compilers for each issue when surely there would have been easier, if less creative, ways of getting it done. It is good to realize and to recognize publicly that this publication has been a powerful and important part of my life all these years. Thank you.

I was nine years old, or thereabouts, when I stamped my foot in the kitchen of our central Illinois farmhouse and informed my parents of my conclusion that, "Well, then, the Bible just isn't true!" There had been a church council meeting that night, a meeting of all the heads of all the households (all male, naturally). They had decided that my mother teaching Paul's missionary journeys to the youth fellowship, who happened to be all boys that year, was a case of a woman having authority over men and must, therefore, be stopped.

My beloved, wise parents allowed that perhaps some parts of the Bible were more true than others. And, they added, just because someone interpreted the Bible to mean thus and so, it didn't necessarily mean thus and so.

That night was the beginning of a lifelong journey to wrest meaning from this text that we call the Bible and claim as the sacred and centering text of the church. It has been a journey marked by both joy and struggle, tears and laughter, heartache and hope. It has also



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been a journey marked by many companions along the way. Twenty years ago, in seminary, I came to know a wonderful group of women; students and faculty, women who loved institutions and women who did not, women at each and every point of a developing feminist perspective, women from many countries. These women had a profound impact on my life. With them, and because of them, I discovered and accepted my vocation as a reader and interpreter of the Bible. Reading through these articles is like hearing once again those beloved voices, though most of these writers are not the actual women with whom I made this journey.

First, Jennifer Ulrich, an intern this past summer at the MCC U.S. Women's Concerns desk, chose the historical articles from the archives. She writes about this project following this article. Ruth Brunk Stoltzfus writes of her discovery of all the women in the Bible. It is an exuberant and joyous piece, evoking a sense of abundance and delight at a time when Mennonite women in leadership were few. Padma Gallup offers a provocative and powerful interpretation of Genesis 1:27-28 from an Asian perspective. Esther Epp-Tiessen examines the biblical texts for feminine imagery and glimpses of female metaphors for God and writes about the difference this makes to her. Christina Bucher exegetes the four Servant Songs in Isaiah and discusses the impact that servanthood theology has had, negatively and positively, on women of faith in the Anabaptist tradition. Al Dueck's poem is an eloquent testimony to the choice we all have to "dream dreams" or "sustain sin." In the background of Regina Shands Stoltzfus' piece, you will hear the music of small girls at play as she reflects on the different voices in her experience and relates them to the biblical story of Mary and Martha.

How rich is life, and how rich are the journeys of feminist women of faith! These articles offer an abundance of experience and insight into the struggle to wrest meaning from the biblical texts and how to live with and into the wisdom gained in the struggle. It is especially important, however, to bring this historical introspection into the present. To that end, two younger women have been involved in the production of this issue.

Malinda Berry and Rachel Miller Jacobs, two young women who graduated from the Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary this past June, have written new articles about their experience with the biblical text for this issue. In their stories, you will note and be glad that some of the struggles of an earlier generation have been resolved. Yet issues of freedom and meaning, integrity and faith are always with us. And it is good that this is so. Both Malinda and Rachel engage the text in lively and powerful ways. In different ways, both of them are finding the sacred text of the church to be profoundly sustaining.

To end with a personal note, I am simply but deeply grateful. I am thankful for all those who have shared this journey, including all the writers in this issue. I am thankful for all the women who have pondered the values of liberation and measured these values in and against the biblical texts. I am thankful for those who have found the texts sustaining and have continued to struggle to find meaning in them. And while this issue is about the vitality of the biblical text, no comment of mine can be complete without also acknowledging those women who have shared parts of this journey but found the texts and the church too heavy with patriarchy to bear. I have learned much from them. I mourn their loss to the church and the reading tradition. I wish them well in their present journeys.

Most of all, I am thankful for the texts themselves—in all their strangeness of language and custom. I am glad that the biblical texts are Other and remain Other for all our attempts to tame them and render them palatable. I am thankful for the variety of voices that speak in the canon through the ages and across the boundaries of geography. I count it all joy to serve these texts and to serve the church by reading them and, especially, by reading them in the company of women.

—compiled by Mary H. Schertz

Mary Schertz, Elkhart, Indiana, is Professor of New Testament at the Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary. This past fall she was on sabbatical at the Ecumenical Institute in Collegetown, MN, where she prayed the hours with the Benedictines, watched pileated woodpeckers at her bird feeder and wrote a commentary on Luke for the *Believers Church Bible Commentary* series.



## From the editor

In 1973, the MCC Peace Section decided to start a Task Force on Women. This task force published the first *Report from the Peace Section Task Force on Women in Church and Society*—a six page stapled mailing—in August of that year. The task force defined this mailing to have three purposes 1) provide a forum for sharing concerns, ideas, and resource materials; 2) make visible and affirm efforts being made by women to create a more whole, inclusive church and society; and 3) alert readers to available leadership positions.

Now 153 issues and many design changes later, we continue to emphasize the sharing of concerns and ideas and affirm the efforts made by women in the church. We continue to believe, as was stated in the first issue, that “by uniting together and sharing information, we can better coordinate efforts to bring about the emergence of a new consciousness in our churches.” In this 153rd issue, we celebrate all of the women who have contributed to this periodical through the years. We have tackled many topics, and our views have not all agreed. Our goal has not been agreement but dialogue among the diversity of voices in the church. I, along with Mary Schertz, am thankful for the unique forum that *Report* has offered to women in the Mennonite and Brethren in Christ churches. As the new editor, I am honored to be counted among these women, as well as the future contributors as we continue to strive for “a more whole, inclusive church and society.”

—Debra Gingerich, editor

## About articles from past issues

We are Christians.

We are also Feminists.

Some say we can't be both,

But for us

Christianity and feminism

Are inseparable.

These words, from the masthead of *Daughters of Sarah*, the no longer published Magazine for Christian Feminists, describes me. Yet I have wanted to find out more about what it means to be a Christian feminist, so this summer I immersed myself in the writings of Mary Daly, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Sallie McFague and some of the other women who have written in this area. While this fulfilled four units of credit toward my master's program, it also was a journey of discovery for me.

I have always known that some feminists feel the church cannot be redeemed from the sin of oppression it has inflicted on women. Mary Daly would be one of those. She started out believing change was possible but later renounced her belief that the church, even if transformed, would ever have anything to offer women. Other women chose to stay and continue the dialogue. They see hope for all of humanity and the world in the words and deeds of Jesus. They feel that the discussion is not about replacing male leadership or male language and images all together, but a move to a more inclusive body which encompasses the whole of humanity and all of creation.

I chose these back articles of *Report* in an attempt to highlight some of the issues which were raised in my readings. The articles reflect on women searching for identity

in the church, women discovering God speaking to them through the Scriptures, women struggling with the call to serve but feeling resistance from the church and women hoping to find themselves in God's image. Some of these authors might be amazed they were included under a feminist theology heading. Maybe that's the beauty of these articles; they are simply about persons trying to serve God and the church as they are called.

I hope you enjoy these pieces. May they add to your understanding of who the church should be, can be, and how we are all called to be faithful.

—Jennifer Ulrich

Jennifer Ulrich will receive a master's in applied women's studies from Claremont Graduate University in January 2001. She grew up in the Midwest and now lives in Harrisonburg, Virginia. She is a member of Community Mennonite Church and catalog librarian at EMU.

  
by Ruth Brunk Stoltzfus

## Women in the Bible

Back in the 1930s when I was a young girl, a minister wrote to my father, a progressive conservative bishop in Virginia. "What are we going to do with those verses (1 Corinthians 14:34, 35) about the silence of women in the church?" My father answered, "We can't latch onto one or two verses in the Bible about silence just to please our own egos."

That would have been good advice for preachers and teachers of the past who built a doctrine of silence for women in the church based on a few Bible verses while ignoring all the other verses about women. For example:

Miriam was a prophetess, or a prophet as some translations render the word for both male and female (Exodus 15:20). "I sent Moses, Aaron, and Miriam to lead you" (Micah 6:4, TEV). Some women are gifted to be leaders.

Deborah was a wife, mother, a prophetess (or prophet), a judge of Israel, a leader (Judges 4 & 5). Like many other women in the Bible, she had stature.

Huldah was a prophetess (or prophet) in the time of Jeremiah (2 Kings 22:12–20).

Elizabeth and Mary spoke under the inspiration of the Spirit (Luke 1:41–45).

Anna was a prophetess (Luke 36–38).

Women were the first persons to be commissioned by Jesus to proclaim the news of his resurrection (Matthew 28:1–10).

Daughters as well as sons "shall prophesy" (Joel 2:28, Acts 2:17).

Priscilla, according to the best manuscripts, took the major role and, with her husband, instructed more perfectly a man (Apollos) who was mighty in the Scriptures (Acts 18:26).

The four unmarried daughters of Phillip were prophetesses proclaiming God's message (Acts 21:9, TEV).



Phoebe was a servant of the church (Romans 16:1, KJV) "who holds office in the congregation" (NEB).

Juniastet, considered by many scholars to have been a woman, was "eminent among the apostles" (Romans 16:7, NEB).

Women and men who proclaimed God's message in the public assembly were given instructions by Paul (1 Corinthians 11:5).

Deaconesses were appointed in the congregation at Ephesus (1 Timothy 5:9).

Women labored with Paul "to spread the Gospel" (Philippians 4:3).

The amazing thing is that these accounts took place when woman's status was shamefully low. Also amazing is the Church's reluctance to be as up-to-date as Old and New Testament times in recognizing women's gifts and using them. In her book, *In Search of God's Ideal Woman*, Dorothy R. Pape mentions Frederick Franson, first missionary commissioned by D. L. Moody's church. She says, "He carefully noted every reference to any kind of speaking ministry or responsible position of women in both the Old and New Testaments and comes up with nearly 100 . . . He emphasizes that it is very strange that the two verses that appear to be against women's spiritual ministry should be made the basis of a doctrine which the whole thrust of the rest of Scripture is against. He warns that this is usually how heresies begin."

What situations caused Paul to speak of women proclaiming God's message in one part of his letter (1 Corinthians 11:5) and to call for women to be silent in another part (1 Corinthians 14:34)? How could asking husbands at home have anything to do with women exercising the spiritual gift of praying or prophesying in the public assembly? *Halley's Bible Handbook* says, "There must have been some local circumstance, unknown to us, that we point to these instructions."

One wonders at the fact that male theologians rendered the Greek word *diakonos* as "servant" when referring to Phoebe (Romans 16:1, KJV) but rendered the same word as "minister" when applied to Paul and Apollos

(1 Corinthians 3:5, KJV) and as "deacon" when referring to other male officers of the church

(1 Timothy 3:10, 12, 13, KJV). The *New English Bible*

renders Romans 16:1: "I commend to you Phoebe, a fellow Christian who holds office in the congregation."

Dorothy R. Pape says, "Theologians are much concerned about office and status and the risk of concluding that a woman could really have been an official in the early church. To me, the vital question is, rather, does God ever want women to open their mouths to proclaim Christ or explain the Scriptures, or is God's ideal for us to be always dumb except about trivialities?"

Bible passages have been used or misused in such a way as to place upon women an unfair share of responsibilities in marriage and family. In the *Amplified Version* of Ephesians 5:21–33, the instruction that wives should reverence their husbands is amplified ten times. The instruction that husbands are to love their wives enough to die for them is not amplified at all. Contrary to the way it has usually been taught, this passage indicates in verse 21 that every living person needs to learn submission, not just wives. In the verses that follow, wives are told how to do it, then husbands are told how to do it.

One wonders why a doctrine of parenting for fathers has not been built on Ephesians 6:4 (KJV), "... Fathers, provoke not your children to wrath: but bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord." Bible teachers have mostly gone along with the idea that parenting is for mothers, not fathers. It is more than interesting that the generic term "fathers," meant to include both parents, is taught in such a way as to exclude fathers from sharing responsibilities at home, while in other passages the generic term "men," meant to include women, is taught in such a way as to exclude women from sharing responsibilities at church.

We have been taught well that Sarah obeyed Abraham (1 Peter 3:6). Have we ever been taught that God once told Abraham to obey Sarah (Genesis 21:12)? The *King James Version* here renders as "hearken unto" a word that in its other passages such as Genesis 22:18 is ren-

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dered "obey." We have not yet built a doctrine of obedience of husbands to wives on the basis of Genesis 21:12.

God created humankind in His own image, "Male and female he created them . . . Let *them* have dominion" over fish, birds, cattle, "and over all the earth" (Genesis 1:26, 27). "I will make him a helper fit for him" (Genesis 2:18, RSV). The term "helper" does not imply subordination. The identical term is most often used of God as helper. Woman was not created to serve Adam but to serve with Adam.

In the context of the fall, sin, and the curse, God said to Eve, ". . . in pain you shall bring forth children, yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you" (Genesis 3:16). Was this a descriptive or a prescriptive statement? According to Galatians 3:28, the whole superior/inferior system is done away with in Christ.

The orthodox Jewish male was taught to thank God daily that he was not born a Gentile, a slave, or a woman. Paul spoke to those very categories when he said, "In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, bond nor free, male nor female" (Galatians 3:28).

Personally, I believe Paul broke custom just as much as he dared to without breaking up the church of his time. He sent a slave to his master intending that the principle of equality he insisted upon would bring about changes. He told Philemon to have Onesimus back, "no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother" (Philemon 16, NIV). As to women locked into their shamefully low position of that time, what changes could be expected as a result of the freedom and equality in Christ spoken of in Galatians 3:28?

Little change has come in some quarters of the church. In fact, earlier progress has been lost. In one congregational discussion, the question was asked, "What is meant by reference to woman as the 'weaker sex' (1 Peter 3:7)?" The pastor answered that it means she is weaker in every way: physically, spiritually, mentally, and morally! *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries* say the passage means a husband "should recognize her more limited physical powers as a woman."

As one who has felt that God gifted and called her for a speaking ministry, I find the most moving thing on the

whole question is the way Jesus respected, valued and commissioned women, breaking the customs of His day in doing so. When Jesus was born into the world, the status of Jewish women had never been lower. No doubt he knew well the oral and written traditions that put women down. Did he know about Aristotle's statement, "Women are all worthless"? Had he known of "expectant" fathers instructing their wives, "If it's a boy, keep it; if it's a girl, expose it" (abandon it without food and shelter to die)? Surely Jesus knew the rabbinical dictum, "The world cannot exist without males and females, but happy is he whose children are sons and woe to him whose children are daughters." Jesus knew well that men avoided speaking to women in public, even to the women in their own families.

With these things in mind (and many more that space does not permit), we see that Jesus radically broke custom in his day. His longest recorded private conversation was with a woman at a public well. (Of all things a Jewish man, a rabbi, speaking to a Samaritan woman, a sinner.) According to the biblical record, she is the first person to whom Jesus revealed that he was the Messiah. This woman who had had a sordid history went back to her town to proclaim Jesus' Messiahship (John 4:1-42). The first persons commissioned by Jesus to proclaim the news of His resurrection were women. (The disciples did not believe them, of course.)

To women who also feel a call to a speaking ministry. I give these words from my heart to yours:

Jesus is risen from death! Stand on your tip toes and shout for joy. Sing the message out and live it out. Tell it to men and women.

Declare it on the authority of Jesus himself (the custom breaker) who said to women in a time when their word meant little, "Do not be afraid. Go and take word to my brothers."

Yes, proclaim the Word. Do not be afraid. The message is great enough to overshadow your fears. Then along with your brothers tell the whole world that Jesus has conquered death for all who come to him.

**Ruth Brunk Stoltzfus lives in Harrisonburg, Virginia and is a member of Shalom Mennonite Church. In 1989, at the age of 79, she was the first woman to be ordained by the Virginia Mennonite Conference.**

"Many of the serious problems of Western feminist theology, which arise from the fact that the feminine is excluded from the Godhead, can be addressed through the appropriation of this Asian religious expression."

from *Asian women doing theology*,  
REPORT NO. 72: MAY-JUNE 1987

## Asian Images of God

Asian feminist theology can take as its starting point the search for a new image of the Godhead. In the past, Asian Christians found it necessary to abjure all things Asian and to appropriate the Christian Gospel as offered from the West, wrapped in layers of ponderous patriarchy, Zoroastrian dualism, Greek philosophy, and the ethics of the marketplace and morality of the dominant male of the Puritan tradition. The rediscovery of the "fact of Jesus" is the needed impetus to peel away cultural encrustations and probe to the heart of the revelation about the Godhead. In doing so, feminist theology is liberated to draw upon sources within its own millenia-old culture and all the living faiths of its neighbors.

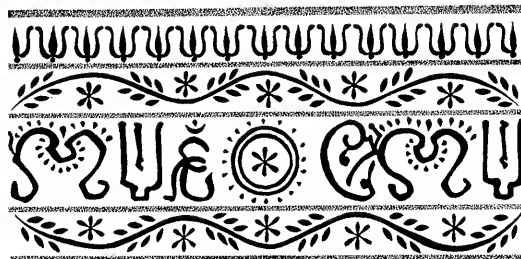
Hindu religion and culture offer a visual, as well as philosophical, concept of the Godhead which may be used in Asian feminist theology to interpret the truth of Genesis 1:27-28. The popular *Arthanareesvara* image is an aesthetically pleasing and artistically excellent expression of a male/female deity. In the philosophical/theological articulation of masculine *Sivam* (absolute good or love) and feminine *Sakti* (absolute power) is contained the idea that neither can function or be revealed without the other. Many of the serious problems of Western feminist theology, which arise from the fact that the feminine is excluded from the Godhead, can be addressed through the appropriation of this Asian religious expression. An uncluttered interpretation of Genesis 1:27-28 is that if the Godhead created humans in its image, then the Godhead must be a male/female, side by side, non-dualistic whole. This is perhaps anthropological theology but a legitimate "doing" of theology.

Asian feminist theology attempts to do theology in the belief that Christianity is hope, not just tradition. The value of tradition is that it prepares for the future, but

it cannot dictate the future. The hope is that the Spirit is always creating something new and full of wonder. Asian women doing theology look to the possibilities beyond reality. A concept of the Godhead that holds the masculine and feminine in equivalence could possibly engender non-dualistic, non-competitive modes of thought and action. Male and female need each other. The Hindu mythology recalls that *Siva* and *Parvathi* realized they could not live apart from each other. They fasted and prayed for the gift of being inseparable. There was a price. Each had to give up part of self to be united into the whole of the *Arthanareesvara* form. Another name for this manifestation is *Arulsivam*, the gracious good. Grace and goodness lead to cooperation, community, mutuality and wholeness if there is a willingness to give up part of self for the sake of the other. This is the hope.

The Hindu Pantheon has as many feminine as masculine manifestations of the nature of the Godhead. Asian peoples have addressed the Deity as "Mother," as often as "Father," for centuries. Only the Christians have inherited an inhibition about calling God "Mother." Conscious cultivation of religious sentiment with regard to women's equality and dignity and recognition of a heavenly, nurturing, caring, loving Mother will go a long way toward achieving equivalence in society. Asian women need to search their languages for non-sexist and inclusive forms of address to God. In Tamil, a common form is *Ammaiappan* (mother/father). Use of these forms in public worship will begin to conscientize congregations to the possibilities of visioning and experiencing God as an inclusive male/female whole. In South Indian languages, the respectful form of address is gender-free. Consistent use of respectful language toward the other is bound to influence valuation of the other.

Excerpted from *Doing Theology—An Asian Feminist Perspective* by Padma Gallup. In *Bulletin of the Commission on Theological Concerns*. Singapore: Christian Council of Asia, December 1983.



by Esther Epp-Tiessen

## Recovering the Bible's feminine imagery

Twelve years ago, while I was in university, I went through a personal and spiritual crisis. I went to talk to my religion professor. I told him that God seemed far away, that I was not at all sure that God knew me and loved and cared for me. My professor listened to me thoughtfully and then asked, "Does it help you to think of God as your heavenly mother?"

I had never thought in such terms before and was quite taken aback at what seemed like a heretical statement. But in subsequent years I have pondered much over that question. And now I can answer, yes, I have found it helpful to conceive God as mother. By so doing, I have been able to acknowledge a God who knows me intimately, loves me and walks with me.

I think this has been the case primarily because of my own family situation. My father was a good father. But like many fathers, he was away from home much of the time. And when at home, his work kept him so busy that he often seemed distant and remote. My mother was the one who knew my friends, knew my fears and worries, knew about any difficulties I was experiencing at school. Largely because of this family dynamic, the concept of God as mother became meaningful to me.

We have grown accustomed to calling God our father. "Father" has become a familiar, comfortable way of addressing God. Yet when Jesus encouraged his listeners to call God their father, it was a revolutionary new title, representing a radical break from Jewish tradition. Jesus' intent was to convey the idea that one's relationship with God is characterized by deep intimacy, confidence, and trust. In fact, the Aramaic word, *Abbe*, that Jesus used was a common, homey, everyday kind of word that would probably more accurately be translated as "dad" or even "daddy."

Jesus' use of the word "father" scandalized many of his listeners who believed that such familiarity with God was blasphemous. The word, *Abbe*, probably prompted a sim-

ilar kind of reaction to that elicited by the word "mother" today. Yet this kind of familiarity was exactly what Jesus wanted to demonstrate—that we can relate to God as a child relates to a parent.

"Father God" is a beautiful image or metaphor. The problem is that it has, in the minds of many, made us think of God as a man. On one level, we know that God is not a man. In Genesis 1, we read that God created both male and female in God's image. In some mysterious, wonderful way, God's nature embraces all those traits we would consider masculine and feminine and transcends both. Yet frequent use of the word "father," along with masculine pronouns, cannot help but reinforce an understanding of God as a man. We forget that "father" is a metaphor.

There is nothing wrong with our use of the word "father" to describe God. Where we err is in ignoring other images—images which can provide balance. While both the Old Testament and the New refer to God predominantly in masculine terms, to do justice to the biblical imagery about God, we need to take note of the significant number of passages where God is spoken of in feminine terms.

In Numbers 11, the Israelites begin to grow weary and to complain as they journey in the wilderness. They look longingly back to their Egyptian captivity and the good food they had. The Lord's anger blazed and Moses responds in their defense, "Did I conceive all this people? Did I bring them forth, that thou shouldst say to me, 'Carry them in your bosom, as a nurse carries the sucking child . . .?'"

Moses' words suggests that God is like the mother of these people. The relationship of God to Israel is like a woman who conceives, gives birth to and nourishes the newborn infant Israel. This is clearly a feminine image.

In Deuteronomy 32, Moses again uses feminine imagery to speak of God. He says to the people, who have once again strayed from worship of God to worship of idols, "You were unmindful of the Rock that begot you and you forgot the God who gave you birth."

God is described as a midwife in Psalm 22: "Thou art he who took me from the womb; thou didst keep me safe



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upon my mother's breasts." This is an image of God as a midwife who assists in the delivery of a child, who catches the newborn as it emerges from its mother's body and immediately places it on her stomach. Despite the pronoun "he," the image again is definitely a feminine one.

Isaiah 42, the description of God's new creation, provides another example. God will give birth to this new creation as a woman gives birth to a child: "Now I will cry out like a woman in travail, I will gasp and pant."

My favorite Old Testament example of feminine imagery for God comes from Isaiah 49. The people of Israel are in despair, claiming that God has forsaken them. God's response is, "Can a woman forget a sucking baby that she should have no compassion for the son of her womb?" The prophet uses perhaps the supreme expression of human love—a mother's love for her child—to describe God's love for Israel.

Some Old Testament scholars have pointed out that the Hebrew word for womb, *rehem*, is also one of the words for "to love," "to show mercy," "to show compassion." Thus, even when the biblical reference does not explicitly describe God as a woman, there is that feminine element present.

In the New Testament, we can find feminine images of God as well. In Luke, to give just one example, Jesus tells his disciples that God is like a woman who, having lost a coin, will search diligently throughout the house until she finds it. Thus, even though masculine images of God predominate in the Bible, there are significant passages where God is described in feminine terms. Given that the Bible was written by men and that it arose out of a patriarchal society where women clearly held a secondary position—where men in fact gave thanks to God that they were not created slaves, Gentiles or women—the existence of these passages is truly remarkable.

One reason, therefore, why we need to broaden our imagery of God to include God as mother is to emphasize elements of the biblical tradition. A second reason is that



when we use one metaphor of God to the exclusion of others, we limit our understanding of who God is. In a sense, we make God in our own image. It is essential that we not confuse our human concepts of God with absolute truth. As Paul says, "Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully" (1 Corinthians 12–13). As humans,

we will never fully understand God. We need to remind ourselves that

all our speech about God is not the full truth. It is a partial truth. What we must strive for is to make our images as inclusive as we possibly can. Masculine images of father need to be balanced by feminine images of mother.

For many people the designation "father" connotes power, strength and authority. It is no accident that many people perceive a God who is a stern judge, because for them that is what father has meant. But we also know that God is forgiving, compassionate, loving unconditionally—qualities that have more traditionally been associated with our mothers. I believe that if our images of God included mother and father, our understanding of God would be enriched.

Of course, the language of "mother" and "father" will not make God real to everyone. For the person who has been abused by her parents, new images and new metaphors may need to be found which communicate a gracious and loving God. The point is that we try not to limit our understanding of God with the use of one image to the exclusion of others.

Finally, I think we need to embrace the feminine, as well as the masculine, reality of God because we need to demonstrate emphatically that the church welcomes men and women equally and that it is committed to seeing men and women develop to their full God-given potential.

For a growing number of women and men, the concept of a masculine God is a stumbling block. As Mary Daly has put it, "If God is a father ruling his people, then it is the nature of things and according to divine plan . . . that society be male-dominated." In other words, if God—the

"We need to remind ourselves that all our speech about God is not the full truth. It is a partial truth. What we must strive for is to make our images as inclusive as we possibly can."

from *Women: Bearing the cross of discipleship*  
REPORT NO. 89: MARCH-APRIL 1990

Supreme Being—is a man, then certainly man is valued over woman. And then certainly the church supports a social system in which men assume authority and domination over women.

Of course, it is not only one image of God the Father which presents such a stumbling block. Women are also excluded in references to Christians as brothers in Christ and sons of God, and they are closed out of many avenues of service in the church. But all these things are interrelated. As a friend once said after attending a Sunday morning service, "The congregation prayed to God the Father, listened to a man preach about the brotherhood of Christ, and sang *Rise up, O Men of God*. I felt like I didn't belong."

There has, from time to time, been discussion about how the Mennonite name represents a barrier to persons outside the German-Swiss traditions, because it has become primarily an ethnic description. I would argue that in much the same way our masculine language about God, as well as our male-dominated church structures, are barriers to women's full identification with the church.

Feminine imagery and feminine language may seem strange and may make us uncomfortable. Some of you may feel much like I felt the first time I saw a picture of an Asian Jesus. After all, Jesus was supposed to have brown hair and blue eyes, like he did in my Sunday school book. With time, I have come to see that an Asian Jesus is every bit as valid as a Caucasian Jesus. We all visualize Christ in ways that speak to us.

It is the same with feminine imagery about God. It is good to be able to imagine God in ways that are meaningful to us, as long as our own particular images do not become our idols, as long as we do not close ourselves to other images and metaphors.

I believe that our acknowledgment of the feminine reality of God can liberate us—both women and men. It can also lead us to new depths in our knowledge of and communion with God.

Esther Epp-Tiessen presented this paper to the MCC Canada board in September 1987. Esther is currently working as Coordinator of Peace Ministries at MCC Canada. She lives in Winnipeg, Manitoba. She is married to Dan and has two sons living, ages 16 and 10, and a third son deceased.

by Christina Bucher

## Servanthood in Isaiah

Since the late nineteenth century, biblical scholars have singled out four passages in the book of Isaiah and identified them as "Servant Songs." Each of these four songs (Isaiah 42:1-4, 49:1-6, 50:4-9, and 52:13-53:12) describes the activity of a figure called the "Servant of Yahweh." Because the poems themselves are ambiguous, much of the scholarly discussion of these passages has focused on the identity of the servant. In some places, they seem to refer to an unnamed individual, but, in other places, they identify the servant as the people of Israel.

Although it is not clear what the author of these poems intended or how they were heard by their first audience, the exiles in Babylonia, it is clear that the early Christians understood these passages to refer to Jesus. The evangelist Matthew, for example, explains Jesus' command to keep his healings a secret as a fulfillment of Isaiah 42:1-4 (see Matthew 12:15-21).

For Christians in the Anabaptist tradition, it should not be difficult to read these poems from Isaiah and reflect on how they apply to Christian discipleship today. Christians in the Anabaptist tradition have long equated discipleship and servanthood. To live as a disciple of Christ is to take on the role of servant, to offer oneself in service to others.

Yet, Christian women today struggle with this definition of discipleship. Taking up the role of servant has led many women not to salvation, wholeness, and liberation, but to abuse, sickness, and self-abnegation. And, while not all women have interpreted servanthood to mean the total denial of the self, many women have failed to develop their full potential as persons and as Christian disciples because they have felt it wrong to put themselves forward.

I recall a Bible study session in which a young woman talked about her discomfort when she interviewed for jobs. When asked by the interviewer to identify her strengths, she found herself unable to do so, even though she knew her unwillingness would likely cost her the job. When pressed by the group, she explained that she considered naming her strengths a sign of pride and, therefore, sinful.

"When looking at the servant songs from an Anabaptist perspective, we might be tempted to focus on the suffering and humiliation of the servant. Yet although all four songs play with the contrast of humiliation and exaltation of suffering and triumph, they do not define servanthood as suffering."

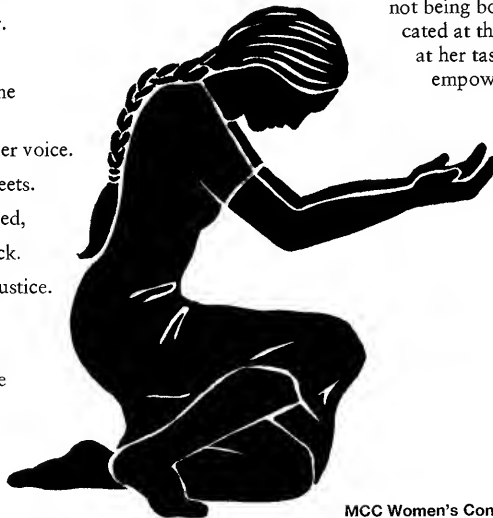
In a book entitled *Beyond Servanthood: Christianity and the Liberation of Women* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1989), theologian Susan Nelson Dunfee argues that the theological concept of service has been a source of self-negation rather than self-empowerment for women. Because we have misunderstood the concept of service, Nelson Dunfee suggests we develop new language that will empower rather than limit women.

But before we abandon servanthood as a way of understanding Christian discipleship, we should re-examine the biblical context of this concept. When looking at the model of Jesus as portrayed in the New Testament, the Anabaptist tradition has tended to emphasize the suffering he experienced. Just as Jesus suffered, so must Jesus' disciples be willing to suffer. In fact, some Christians would say that suffering is essential to the Christian lifestyle.

When looking at the servant songs from an Anabaptist perspective, we might be tempted to focus on the suffering and humiliation of the servant. Yet although all four songs play with the contrast of humiliation and exaltation of suffering and triumph, they do not define servanthood as suffering.

Let us turn to Isaiah 42:1-4 (author's paraphrase) where a prophet speaks of servanthood in proclaiming God's message:

Here is my servant! I will support her.  
My chosen one! I delight in her.  
I have put my Spirit upon her.  
She will bring forth justice to the nations.  
She will not cry out or lift up her voice.  
She will not be heard in the streets.  
She will not break a crushed reed,  
Or quench a dimly burning wick.  
She will faithfully bring forth justice.  
She will not be quenched or crushed,  
Until she has established justice in the earth,  
And the Coastlands wait for her instruction.



In this first servant song, we notice that God presents the servant with the stamp of divine approval. God refers to the servant as "my chosen one." God delights in her. In choosing her as servant, God has honored her. Yet, the poem says that the servant works quietly, unobtrusively. Does this mean that God honors her because she is humble? Does this mean that only those persons who refuse to put themselves forward can become God's servants?

When we look at the historical context in which this prophetic message was first pronounced we discover that the Israelite people at that time were experiencing humiliation and suffering. Living in exile in Babylonia, the people felt discouraged. Some felt that God had abandoned them. To these people the prophet says, "You may appear humiliated to the world, but God has chosen you for a special task."

This servant song plays with the paradox of how someone who does not have a position of honor or power will be able to accomplish God's will. It does not praise the servant because the servant is humble, but rather, it marvels that someone who lacks power, at least by worldly standards, can achieve so much. The song, then, does not lead us to promote humility as a job qualification for the role of servant. Instead, the poem encourages all those persons who feel they lack talent to recognize the special gifts they have. The servant succeeds at her task despite not being born in the proper family or educated at the best university; she succeeds at her task because God chooses to empower her with the divine Spirit.

continued on page 12

"God refers to the servant  
as 'my chosen one.' God  
delights in her. In choosing  
her as servant, God has  
honored her."

from *One-generation Mennonites*  
REPORT NO. 119: MARCH-APRIL 1995

One of the best-known servants of God, Moses, tried to turn down the job he was offered. Similarly, the prophet Jeremiah tried to refuse God's call to service because he felt he was not mature enough for the task. In fact, throughout the Bible we find that God chooses to work through persons whom the world ignores. And by choosing them, God thereby grants them the status that has not been theirs according to world standards. For example, in the Magnificat, Mary praises God because "He has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden. For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed" (Luke 1:48). Servanthood is not blessed by God because of the suffering; a servant is blessed and used by God despite their humiliated status in the eyes of the world. The message of the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ, has to do with salvation, not with suffering and defeat. We in the Anabaptist tradition, however, tend to view suffering as an end result. We have made it into a kind of badge of honor, so that if you are not feeling humbled by your situation, you think you must be doing something wrong.

Although the servant in the song from Isaiah acts quietly, her work has worldwide implications. Recognizing ourselves as servants, we are called by God to not accept that worldly limitation. We are not to continue to hide ourselves under bushel baskets or modestly deny our work. As servants of God we are freed from being bound by worldly evaluations of who has God's power and authority. We recognize that God empowers us to work with authority, regardless of worldly standards. Servanthood calls us to throw off that which limits and confines us. It frees us to act. It calls us to wholeness, to the fullness of life. And, it leads us to live boldly and confidently, to accept our chosenness, to believe that God delights in us. God has called us to serve.

God has grasped hold of us and chosen us.

God has empowered us with the divine Spirit.

Let us act faithfully as the servants of God  
to bring forth justice in the world.

Christina Bucher is an Associate Professor of Religion at Elizabethtown College, Elizabethtown, Pennsylvania. She lives in Lancaster, Pennsylvania.

by Al Dueck

## My pastor is a woman

I am a son of Menno,  
an arbitrary blessing.  
One chromosome difference and so  
Privileged to lead, to assert, to generate.

As a male considered  
not an inferior image of God  
not less rational,  
not the weaker vessel,  
not the original sinner,  
not the giver of the apple.

But cursed are Menno's daughters by his sons,  
Condemned to silence, to assistance, to dependency,  
Not powered to lead.

In days past lumped with slaves and Gentiles,  
Persons one thankfully was not created.  
The outer court was their lot.

A sign of the fall  
Women give birth in pain;  
A sign of the fall  
Men control how they mediate life.

In the world men lord it over women  
but not so among you.

Oh, children of Menno,  
your center will not hold,  
your spirit will die,  
if woman cannot also speak the word of God.

Sons of Menno in repentance give away your power,  
Hide not behind human rules divinely blessed.

If we are not just and compassionate  
Our daughters will not dream dreams,  
Our sons will sustain our sins.

Al Dueck is currently on faculty at Fuller Theological Seminary's School of Psychology where he teaches courses on the dialogue between theology and psychology. He is active in the Pasadena Mennonite Church. The poem was written when the Mennonite Brethren church was discussing the leadership role of women in congregations. He was then director of the Marriage and Family Therapy program at the Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary in Fresno, California



by Regina Shands Stoltzfus

## Circling song

I heard my daughter singing a song the other day that brought back a flood of childhood memories. When I was a skinny little kid growing up on Cleveland's east side, we played a lot of circle games. Circle games are the ultimate in non-competitive play, which I think is why I liked them so much. Anyway, Rachel was walking around singing "shake it to the east, shake it to the west," part of the game Little Sally Walker.

To play, a group of kids would hold hands and form a ring around one child who played Sally. Slowly circling Sally, who crouched on the ground with her face in her hands, the group would sing:

Little Sally Walker

Sitting in a saucer

Weeping and crying

For someone to love her

After this, the pace would pick up, and as Sally rose to her feet the group sang:

Rise, Sally, rise!

Dry your weeping eyes

Put your hands on your hips

And let your backbone slip

Backbone slipping, for those not familiar with it, is simply the act of swinging your hips from side to side—what little girls might do in order to appear grown up, womanish. (Womanish, a familiar expression in the African American community, is the term from which author Alice Walker coined a similar word—womanist, describing a black feminist or feminist of color.)

Aww, shake it to the east

Aww, shake it to the west

Shake it to the very one

That you love the best.



A new Sally would be chosen, and the game went on until everyone had a chance to slip backbones and shake it, sometimes several times over.

This little game, oddly enough, parallels my thinking on the relationship between individuals and community, of African American women's roles within our society, or my own growth and understanding of myself as a woman of color who also happens to be Mennonite. Sally is in the center, encircled by her community, weeping for someone to love her. As little girls, we assumed Sally wanted a boyfriend or a husband, but the song says for just someone to love her—to recognize, accept and value her. Perhaps Sally felt alone in her saucer because she looked or acted differently from the mainstream—she was an outcast from some place and/or people of which she wanted to be a part.

However, Sally's immediate community, those who know her and understand her and have stood in her place, surround Sally both physically and with song. Stop weeping. Stand up for yourself and do what you have to do to find your place in this world. Be bold, be downright womanish, and then when you are done, choose someone else to help along the same path.

My mother tried to raise me to be a speak-up-for-myself, a take-charge and if necessary take-over kind of woman, like she is. I don't think I ever heard the words "act like a lady," as in step back and be quiet, fall from her lips. Although I'm not certain how well her lessons took, I know full well the reasons she taught them. She wanted me to be able to take care of myself, to get what I need in life, because the odds were that no one would provide this for me. She never said to me being a woman is hard,

"Yet sometimes it is hard for me to reconcile those lessons of my youth with the messages I get from the larger church regarding us women."

"However, Sally's immediate community, those who know her and understand her and have stood in her place, surround Sally both physically and with song . . . Be bold, be downright womanish, and then when you are done, choose someone else to help along the same path."

or that people would try to mistreat me because I was black. But she made sure I knew the stories that history told, and knew how to step up and assert myself so that I wouldn't fall victim to a hard life or cruel treatment, or become invisible. Fight back. Rise up. It is the way I will raise my own daughter.

Yet sometimes it is hard for me to reconcile those lessons of my youth with the messages I get from the larger church regarding us women, especially those of us working in churches or for church agencies. My mother in one ear telling me to speak up, and a chorus of voices in the other saying, women, keep silent. The vision in my mind's eye of my mother demonstrating how to make yourself noticed upon entering a room, and the reality of entering a room, or a sanctuary, or an assembly hall, and being looked over, or looked through. The need to be an individual who looks out for herself, but wondering if acting on that need will make me an outcast in the very community I desire to be a part of, because I am not humble enough, not sacrificing enough—not seen as one willing to suffer and serve.

When Jesus came to visit at the home of Mary and Martha, Mary sat at the Lord's feet, listening to what he said. Martha bustled about in the kitchen, busily preparing for her guests. I imagine her fretting over hot pots, sweat dripping down and burning her eyes, wondering if there are enough utensils for all the visitors, noticing the room still needed to be swept and the tables wiped down, thinking how she could use a hand and her sister has the nerve to be cooling her heels in the next room with Jesus and the disciples. And I imagine Mary probably felt guilty hearing Martha's rattling in the back rooms, her feet hurrying across the floor, pots and pans clang-

ing, perhaps even a long, loud sigh or two. But the chance to learn at the feet of Jesus! How she must have been torn! And humiliated, when Martha comes in and tells the Lord to make Mary help with the housework. And Jesus gives a soft reply. Mary has chosen what is better.

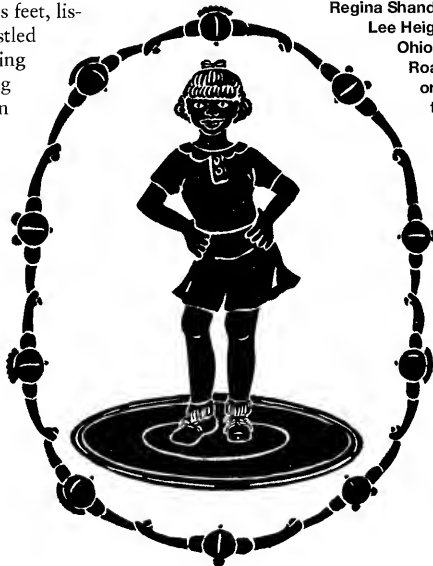
Mary seemed selfish to Martha. Perhaps Mary was being selfish. But she was also grabbing an opportunity not available to women before in that time and place, and perhaps not ever again. Who knew what she was risking, sitting at the feet of Jesus? And worse yet, ignoring (for the moment) the role she was supposed to play, that of the invisible servant. Both Mary and Martha were doing important tasks, but both went unrecognized and undervalued by the people around them.

Mary, in this story, reminds me of me. And I'm filled with nagging self doubt about being in that place, yet Jesus' soft reply gives me hope.

Rise, Sally.

Rise, Mary.

Rise, Martha.



Regina Shands Stoltzfus is the associate pastor at Lee Heights Community Church in Cleveland, Ohio. She is co-coordinator of Damascus Road, an anti-racism educating and organizing network. She is married to Art Stoltzfus and the co-parent of four children.

"As I study the stories of biblical women like Vashti and Bathsheba, I have come to look to the Bible as a place where I can find, and thus more fully trust, a God of women's work."



by Malinda Elizabeth Berry

## Becoming Vashti and Bathsheba

The story of my relationship with the Bible is a story of personal development.

I am part of a generation of biblically illiterate Mennonites. Oh sure, I learned to recite the books of the Bible and describe the continuity between the two testaments. I could even tell you about the Apocrypha. But there is a great deal to the Bible about which I have been willfully ignorant.

Growing up in a heavily populated Mennonite area of the United States in the light and shadows of well-known church institutions may make my disclosure seem a bit shocking. Even worse, though, is the fact that I was very attentive in my Mennonite Sunday school classes and quite a good student at the Mennonite high school and college I attended. As I think back on those experiences, I must confess that I got away with being biblically illiterate not because the Bible was ignored, but because I thought I was past the Bible, and memorizing scripture was not my idea of time well spent.

By the time I got to junior high, I didn't want to hear any more Bible stories because my valiant Sunday school teachers—armed with Herald Press' Foundation Series—just kept telling us the same old stories over and over. I knew all those stories already, my reasoning went, so I stopped paying attention to the Bible.

About my second year of high school, our Sunday school teacher tried his best to get us excited about studying the Old Testament. (This the summer after our previous teacher tried to get us to read John's Revelation.) We needed to understand Israel's history, he declared. Cynical youth that I was, I blew off this admonition with a, "Well, I'm not Jewish, and besides, all we Mennonites care about is the New Testament." And with that, I turned my back on the Bible again.

By the time I had graduated from high school, I was sure of one thing about the Bible: I'd had it with patriarchy which seemed to be most insidious in the church and its interpretation of the Word of God. I was appalled that Lot was going to "feed" his daughters to the ruffians pounding at his door, troubled that David got away with a major plot against Bathsheba and her husband Uriah, and scandalized by the sad story of Tamar's rape. There were a few things about the Bible my Sunday school teachers forgot to tell me—especially about what I perceived as the Bible's dark side.

Despite my resistance to the biblical text for its bad parts, I found myself trying to commit to reading the Good Book. These on/off commitments took the form of New Years' resolutions. I figured that as the owner of four Bibles I ought to at least read one version of the text. Moreover, in all my raging against the patriarchal biblical machine, I had to admit that I really did not know the Bible. My *One Year Bible* had a daily reading plan that consisted a reading from the Old Testament, Psalms, the New Testament, and the Epistles. I struggled to make sense of what I was reading not only theologically but literally as well. All those hard-to-pronounce names and places, slain lambs, floods. What was it all about? After about a month or so, I would inevitably give up. Looking back, I think I feared that if I really read and studied this set of texts, I might decode the gospel message as dramatically as Paul, and I was not ready for that much transformation.

In college, I loved my religion and ethics courses. Delving into "issues" and ethics which allowed me to pontificate and posture was an important stage of development for me. My introduction to feminist and womanist theology was instrumental in focusing my moral vision. In these contexts, I found I enjoyed working with the biblical text because the Bible became a tool for me as I patterned my thoughts according to an ethical and theological framework. However, I neglected to develop a reverence for the sacred nature of the texts I studied. The Bible functioned as a tool—nothing less, nothing more.

Being at seminary has been a watershed experience for me. I have found a place where I can ask tough questions of the biblical text and also—through worship and

study—experience the Bible as the sacred *Words of God*. I can go down to the book stacks in the library and pour over volumes that help me voice my questions. For me, the power of the Bible comes from finally paying attention after all these years.

I come from a privileged class and a privileged family, so I have never looked to the Bible as a source of liberation from socioeconomic troubles. But I also have stories from my family which have stirred in me a deep commitment to women's liberation from sexism and patriarchy. My commitment to this vision and the work it involves comes from experiences of anger and pain. As I study the stories of biblical women like Queen Vashti and Bathsheba, I have come to look to the Bible as a place where I can find, and thus more fully trust, a God of women's work. My work is to study the Bible, my sacred text, full of stories about women who have survived and suffered and who have extended hospitality and hope.

There are some lines from Maya Angelou's poem "On the Pulse of Morning" (New York: Random House, 1993) that speak to my situation as a woman who reads the Bible:

Each of you, descendant of some passed-  
On traveler, has been paid for.

*(text omitted)*

Here, root yourselves beside me.

I am that Tree planted by the River,  
Which will not be moved.

I, the Rock, I the River, I the Tree

I am yours—your passages have been paid.

Lift up your faces, you have a piercing need

For this bright morning dawning for you.

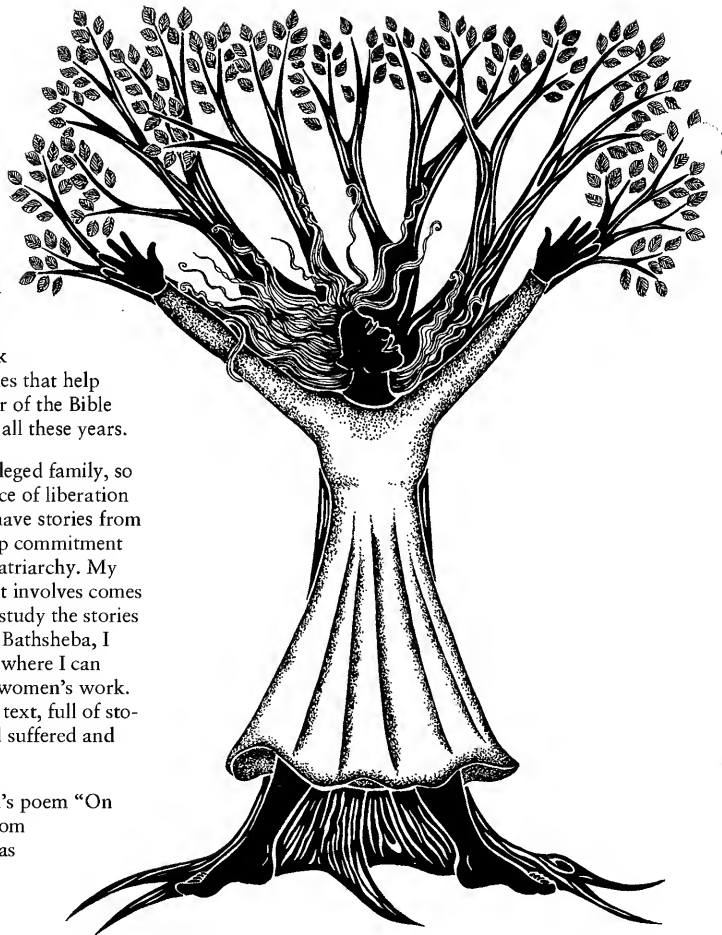
History, despite its wrenching pain,

Cannot be un-lived, but if faced

With courage, need not be lived again.

Lift up your eyes

Upon this day breaking for you.



Now as I read the Bible, womanist perspectives often function as my primary interpretive lenses. The gift of womanism to me is courage. My passage has been paid, I have little to fear. I have the power to be a visionary. I can demand that we, the Church, look for the sacred in both the light and the shadows, requiring that our moral vision go beyond what is right or wrong. If we do this, then we will see each other so closely, listen to each other so intently that we can taste one another's tears of joy and sorrow. I feel my bright day dawning and courage bubbling in my veins. As I study, more important to me than satisfying my christological questions has been the cultivation of women role models from the stories of Scripture—women like Vashti and Martha who know their worth. When it comes to the Bible, then, these women become us and we become them.



"I have found a place where  
I can ask tough questions  
of the biblical text and also—  
through worship and study—  
experience the Bible as the  
sacred Words of God."

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We are Vashti. With our heads held high, we will not be  
party to men's manipulations.

We are Bathsheba. We have anger because the powerful  
stole from us what they had no right to touch.

We are the Canaanite woman. We seek justice for those  
close to us, knowing that even men are not above  
reproach.

We are Martha. We fuss over details, and we are commit-  
ted to Jesus' moral vision.

We are these women.

And we have survived.

And we will continue to live on into the future because  
our stories and our lives are sacred.

Malinda Elizabeth Berry is completing her MA in Peace Studies at  
AMBS. Her main area of academic interest is in Mennonite peace  
theology. She also enjoys kite flying, afternoons of Ultimate  
Frisbee, and playing Rook.

## The story of Vashti

We find Vashti's story in the book of Esther 1:9–22. In  
fourteen verses, this woman makes quite an impression  
on readers. She is married to Xerxes, king of the Persian  
empire, and one evening he sends some eunuchs to bring  
Vashti into his presence. The queen refuses to go because  
she knows he's been eating and drinking to the point of  
overindulgence. His summons is merely a way for him to  
show her off in front of his male guests, and the narrative  
suggests that she will not accept being handled in such a  
vulgar manner. Because of her choice to disobey Xerxes,  
she is no longer a queen.

In her reflections on this part of Esther, Sidnie White  
Crawford writes, "The character of Vashti the Queen  
serves as a foil to Esther the Queen, and very different  
fates await each . . . . The minute she opposes her hus-  
band the king, the entire machinery of the state descends  
on her head, and she loses all status and power. To many  
modern commentators, Vashti is a feminist hero, oppos-  
ing the male power structure with what little independ-  
ence she has . . . . However, in the story, Vashti fails, and  
Esther succeeds. What message is the author trying  
to convey? Can we reconcile that message to our differing  
ideas about the status and role of women in society?"  
(Sidnie White Crawford, "Esther," *The New Interpreter's*  
*Bible*, vol. 3, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999, pg. 883)

In my own life, Vashti is an increasingly important figure  
for three reasons. First, she is a feminist hero for me. She  
urges me to remain steadfast in my commitments to  
working for gender justice. Secondly, Vashti reminds me  
that this work is not without sacrifice. Through the exam-  
ple of this Persian queen, I must ask, "Am I ready to pay  
the price for being faithful to God's *shalom* when it comes  
to integrity and building right-relationships?" Finally,  
Vashti is a woman of action. Esther is certainly bold in  
her willingness to risk so much for others, but unlike her  
predecessor, her methods are not those of the activist. As  
a woman of color, I am challenged by Vashti's story not  
only to know and remember my own worth but to have  
the courage to tell others who I am, as well.

—Malinda Elizabeth Berry

"I turn to the Bible to profit from, wrestle with, question and be questioned by the text: to engage in conversation with God and with the people of faith who have gone before me."

by Rachel Miller Jacobs

## Why I read the Bible

Why do I read the Bible? Because I believe it's a "good thing," not in the Martha Stewart sense (cafe curtains are a "good thing") but in the biblical sense ("Lord, to whom can we go? Yours are the words of eternal life"). I turn to the Bible to profit from, wrestle with, question and be questioned by the text: to engage in conversation with God and with the people of faith who have gone before me. All of us have fundamental and cherished convictions and loyalties, things that are so core that we can neither really explain nor defend them. Much of what I have to say about how and why I read the Bible operates at this level. It may not be convincing to anyone else. It can't be proven. It just is.

Over the course of my life I've read the Bible in many ways. As a pre-schooler, I spent hours poring over my children's Bible, paying special attention to the stories that had good illustrations (usually Old Testament ones—my two favorites were Elijah and the prophets of Baal, and Absalom getting his hair caught in the tree). Then I went through a sentimental phase. I carefully copied Bible verses and decorated the borders around them with flowers. In competitive adolescence, I memorized sections of the Sermon on the Mount in order to emerge triumphant from Bible memory contests. As a college student, I "read myself into" Biblical texts, imagining myself as one of the first hearers of the ten commandments or as one of the people in the crowd around Jesus. I also learned to read the Bible critically and do inductive Bible study in Bible classes. But in many ways, the Bible remained outside of me—both stiflingly familiar and puzzlingly odd. Most of the time, I read it and thought, "What could God have been thinking?"

When I went to seminary and started learning Greek, I couldn't go racing through big chunks of text anymore. Now every word, every phrase took effort to understand. Because I was moving so slowly, the texts I was translating worked their way into me at a new level—they rattled around in my heart and soul, as well as in my head. I was stunned both by the immediacy of what I was reading and its great distance in time. The Bible seemed both more vivid and more foreign than it had ever been before. And little by little, it was becoming mine. I owned texts I'd studied. I supplemented my assigned "thinking" work with memorizing the text, singing hymns based on it, reading it in different translations, or "praying" it for a week at a time.

Especially helpful to me was realizing that all translations and all commentaries were interpretations of the biblical text, and that I was part of the community of folks who could do that interpretive work. Seminary gave me some valuable tools in going up against the experts and arguing a different case, so that they couldn't just trot out the Greek to win the argument. I could read Greek too, and I still disagreed. But even more important for me than this "head knowledge" was an internal shift that took place gradually and unconsciously. I began to feel passionately both that I wanted to be part of an interpretive community (as opposed to being obligated to be part of an interpretive community) and that God was longing to engage with me through my study of the Bible.

What does it mean to me to understand the Bible as a way that God engages with us? Three ideas have been especially helpful to me. The first grows out of the worship materials of the Iona Community in Scotland: the conviction that the work of the Spirit is both to comfort and disturb. Does our work with the Bible both comfort and disturb us? And, especially, are we willing to let the Bible comfort others and shake us up?

**"Especially helpful to me was realizing that all translations and all commentaries were interpretations of the biblical text, and that I was part of the community of folks who could do that interpretive work."**

Secondly, do we understand that the Bible is not all one thing, and are we reading it accordingly? We don't read newspapers, letters from our families and friends, novels, and poems in the same way. Are we willing to let parts of the Bible be friendly letters, love poetry, encouragement to those under persecution, or historical record? I've been amazed to discover the extent to which I tie myself in knots by trying to read the Bible from my habitual perspective, as advice on how to do it right. The truth is, the Bible isn't all advice, nor are all parts of it concerned with what I think of as "doing it right." Trying to read it all one way actually drives me away from the Bible, because it's too frustrating to cope with all those impossible demands, mind-boggling irrelevancies, and hopeless contradictions. But as a conversation partner—what more could I ask for?

Finally, I believe that God has given us the Bible "for our God," not like a spanking ("I'm doing this for your good") but like an embrace. So I approach it looking for that good. Perhaps the good is what comes out of my struggling to make sense of it, wrestling like Jacob until I've received a blessing. This may even mean that it is the wrestling, and not the text itself, that is "the good." Perhaps the good is learning that the Bible doesn't say what I always thought it did (either positively or negatively). Perhaps the good is engaging with others in conversation about what the Bible means. Always the good points me to God—the "real thing" of which the Bible is only the witness.

About a year ago, I worked myself into a lather over the story of Jesus at Mary and Martha's house (why does Jesus denigrate Martha's household work?) and the way that story has been interpreted (women's household work is worthless and they can't really be students either, Jesus' example notwithstanding). In the process, I failed to notice that Luke wasn't making either a feminist or an anti-feminist manifesto, but simply speaking of the obligation and invitation to a disciple to sit at Jesus' feet and not have that taken away. All the commentators, and I with them, thought this was a story about women, but what if it wasn't, really? It startled me to realize that I might have been arguing with God about something that God found vaguely amusing but perhaps not really to the point.

In spite of this insight, I find I'm still not completely done with this text. But working with it, and other texts like it, is like a good run or a tickle-fight with my kids: it makes me feel incredibly alive, in the creation sense of the word. Alive in the image of God. Looking around me for God's work in the world. And maybe a little sweaty too.

**Rachel Miller Jacobs, Goshen, Indiana, graduated from AMBS with the MDiv in June, 2000. She is presently engaged in home schooling her oldest son, living a very active life with her family and friends, and pondering the next steps in her ministry.**



WOMEN'S CONCERNS REPORT is published bimonthly by the MCC Committees on Women's Concerns. We believe that Jesus Christ teaches equality of all persons. By sharing information and ideas, the committees strive to promote new relationships and corresponding supporting structures through which women and men can grow toward wholeness and mutuality. Articles and views presented in REPORT do not necessarily reflect official positions of the Committees on Women's Concerns. Please do not reproduce without permission.

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## News and Verbs

Mennonite Women has named Rhoda Keener of Shippensburg, Pennsylvania, as its new administrator. Most recently, Keener, a member of Marion Mennonite Church, worked as a mental health therapist at a shelter for battered women. She holds a master's degree in mental health counseling and Certificate in Theology from Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary.

June Thomsen has begun as pastor of Grace Community Church in Chicago, Illinois.

Marlene Epp has been appointed to a faculty position as Assistant Professor of History and PACS at Conrad Grebel College. Epp received her PhD from the University of Toronto. Her book, *Women without Men: Mennonite Refugees of the Second World War*, has recently been published by University of Toronto Press.

Women Doing Theology conference is scheduled for May 4-5, 2001 at Conrad Grebel College in Waterloo, Ontario. *Embracing Hope: Envisioning an inclusive theology of service* is the theme for the event. Some speakers include Lydia Harder, former director of Toronto Mennonite School of Theology; Mary Malone, historian and theologian; and Alix Lozano, director of the Anabaptist seminary in Columbia. There will also be local storytellers and a showcase of women's gifts (handcrafts, art, music, dance, drama, writing, etc). For more information, please contact Miriam Frey at 519-885-9086 or miriamf@nonline.net.

Prevencion de la Violencia Familiar, a conference sponsored by MCC U.S. Women's Concerns for Mennonite and Brethren in Christ Hispanics on preventing family violence will be held on April 20-21, 2001 in Akron, Pennsylvania. One of the resource persons will be Elizabeth Soto Albrecht. For more information, please contact Beth Graybill at MCC U.S., Box 500, Akron, PA 17501, 717 859-3889 or beg@mccus.org.

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